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CONDITION OF LABOR IN SOUTHERN COTTON MILLS

BY LEWIS W. PARKER,
Treasurer, Monaghan Mills, Greenville, S. C.

No understanding of the present labor conditions in the cotton mills of the South can be had without an appreciation of conditions previous to the development of the cotton mill industry. Prior to the war, and until twenty-five years thereafter, the South, and particularly that portion of it in which the large majority and the most successful of the cotton mills are situated, was purely agricultural. No manufacturing industries could be found therein, and the people were wholly dependent upon such a scanty living as could be drawn from the soil. Indeed, manufacturing was discouraged. As late as 1845 William Gregg, who founded what has since become one of the most successful cotton factories in the South, addressed to the legislature of South Carolina a most able argument entitled "An Inquiry as to the Propriety of Granting Charters of Incorporation for Manufacturing and other purposes in South Carolina." Prior to that time, and indeed for many years thereafter, manufacturing was discouraged, as the leaders in thought believed that agriculture encouraged the development of the better class of citizenship.

It was not until subsequent to 1880 that there was any considerable impetus to cotton manufacturing in the South. The State of South Carolina was most pronounced in its development of this industry, and is to-day the leading southern state in the industry, and second only to Massachusetts in the whole Union. In 1880, the total capital invested in cotton manufacturing in South Carolina was \$2,776,100. By 1907 this amount was increased to \$103,821,919, and it is safe to say that to-day it has risen to approximately \$110,000,000, or nearly forty-fold in less than thirty years. In 1880, the number of employees engaged in the industry was 2,018; in 1890, 8,071; in 1907, 54,887, and it is safe to say that to-day the number approximates 60,000. In a period therefore of less than thirty years, the number of employees has been increased thirty-fold. The U. S. Census of 1900 gave to the State of South Carolina a population of 1,340,316, of which population 1,279,572 had been born within

the state, and only 60,774 born without the state, and of these latter, 13,544 had been born in Georgia, 29,541 in North Carolina and 2,926 in Virginia. The emigration from these three states was to a very large extent immigration to cotton mill communities, and the influx was from the mountainous sections of the three states named. To-day the total number of residents in the cotton mill villages cannot be far from 200,000, and as all of these are white, they represent fully one-fourth of the white population of the state. The cotton mill employees have not been drawn from other manufacturing industries or from alien communities but they are of the same class and type as the remaining white population of the state.

With relation to their previous lives, they may be divided into three classes. First and the largest proportion, are those who have come from the mountainous sections of North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia and Georgia, with a small proportion from the mountains of Tennessee; second there are those who have been drawn from the country surrounding the cotton mills; hitherto engaged in agriculture; and third, those who, having been unfortunate in other pursuits, have found in the cotton mills a means of livelihood. The first class is by all means the largest; the second class represents a fair proportion—say one-third of the employees, and the last class represents a small proportion—say one-tenth. The first class are the descendants of the first settlers in the mountains, whose ancestors settled there probably a century ago, and whose descendants eked out a living by the pursuit of agriculture. They lived in most primitive style, and had few advantages socially and educationally. The second class represent to a large extent the tenants of small farms, who, after years of trial, found they could not make on rented land a living for their families. The third class are often representative of some of the best families in the state, who were driven by misfortune to industrial labor.

A very large proportion of the employees therefore came to the mills without previous experience in the new life they were to lead. Isolated on the farms and in the mountains, their lives had been individual as contrasted with the communal, and after their congregation in the mill village it has necessarily taken some time for them to adjust themselves to new conditions. The necessity of this adjustment, however, has been one of the problems of the managers of the industry. In the very first stages of the development,

in the eighties, the corporations recognized the necessity of education of their employees, and, with the construction of the first mills, we find the building of schoolhouses and churches. Experience, however, has taught the managers of these corporations that they had to go even farther in the development of their employees, and the more successful and largest corporations have given most careful consideration to this subject. At many of the larger factories, kindergartens have been instituted for the purpose of educating and developing the younger children, as also for the giving of relief to the mothers of families during the hours in which the children are in attendance upon the kindergarten; Y. M. C. A. and similar institutions have been encouraged in order to mold the characters of the young men, and Y. W. C. A. and similar associations have been encouraged for a like purpose with the young women. Trained nurses, in a number of instances, are maintained in the mill villages in order to instruct the employees in the methods of caring for the sick and in all matters of health and hygiene. Night schools have been instituted in many villages in order to give education to those who, in the period in which they ordinarily would have secured education, had not the advantages thereof and in short, most of the well managed corporations of the state, and I believe of the South at large—though my familiarity with conditions is confined largely to the State of South Carolina—have recognized that in order to secure the development of the industry which is desired, it is necessary first to develop and educate employees. This development has not been in any sense from a paternalistic idea or from any desire to do for the employees that which had best be done by them, but there has simply been a recognition of the fact that their employees have not had opportunities to know another character of living and that ideals must be set for them. I cannot express the view of these managers better than has been done by Professor William P. Few, Dean and Professor of English in Trinity College, North Carolina, in a recent article appearing in the "South Atlantic Quarterly," entitled "The Constructive Philanthropy of a Southern Cotton Mill," in which he says:

"Through church, school, library, public lectures and private instruction, personal sympathy and example, through wholesome conditions and attractive surroundings, the management is seeking to educate and elevate not only the children of the community, but

also the whole population, the grown-ups as well as the young. Through all of these processes and by the use of these most approved methods, I believe a general tendency is being created that is improving and uplifting the community. A higher standard of living is being set and this will be a controlling influence in many an individual life and in many a home."

That the southern manufacturer has been correct in his conception of the effect of the policy pursued is proved not only by the enormous increase of the industry in recent years, but also by the character of the work which is being done in the industry. The writer has been connected with cotton manufacturing only ten years, but during that period he has seen a great change in the character of the product of southern mills. Ten years ago, the South had demonstrated its ability to monopolize the coarser grades of cotton cloth, but it was stated then in all earnestness by able manufacturers of other sections that the South would be confined by its climate and by the character of its employees to this coarser product. Barely ten years ago, the writer was told by one of the most successful of eastern manufacturers that the East had no reason to fear the development of the South in print cloth and higher numbers, as the South could not successfully manufacture such numbers for the causes stated. To-day a very large proportion of print cloths are manufactured in the South, and the proportion is steadily increasing. Likewise, it has been demonstrated that in even much finer cloths and yarns, the South can compete successfully, and I think the next few years will find many southern mills in active competition with New Bedford and similar eastern centers in the production of the finest class of cotton goods. To accomplish this result, there has been needed not alone the education of employees, though this has been a primal factor, but the manufacturers themselves have had to become in a way educated. To those accustomed to find trained business men and mechanics at the head of large industrial establishments it must be a puzzle to consider the character of men who are at the head of southern cotton mills, and who are succeeding in the industry. A study of the previous occupation of these men shows them to have been lawyers, doctors, merchants, ministers of the gospel, planters, and indeed everything but cotton manufacturers. Only a very small proportion of these managers, previous to their connection with the corporations which they instituted and

the plants which they developed, had any experience whatever in cotton manufacturing and a very large proportion had no experience in active business. For the successful development, therefore, of the industry, it has been necessary to educate all connected therewith, from the president down to the sweeper in the mill.

The effect of the education and improvement of the operatives, and of the higher character of product towards which the industry is gradually being developed, can best be illustrated by its effect upon the wages of the employees. In the year 1902, Mr. August Kohn, a correspondent of the "News and Courier," a leading newspaper in South Carolina, published a pamphlet in which the conditions in South Carolina cotton mills were carefully and fully reviewed. Five years thereafter, or in 1907, he again, as correspondent of the same paper, published a second pamphlet, reviewing these conditions in the latter year. His analysis of the average pay of the employees is interesting. The wages in June were: 1902, 76 cents per day; 1903, 88 cents per day; 1904, 97 cents per day; 1905, \$1.03 per day; 1906, \$1.10 per day; 1907, \$1.23 per day.

Whilst, therefore, the increase has been steady and continuous, the wage will be recognized as still comparatively low, unless consideration is taken of the large proportion of minors and women in the employment, and unless comparison is made with the wages commonly paid in the community in other classes of work. In the article referred to, by Professor Few, he says, "The wage is higher than the wage paid the ordinary day laborer in the community," and in this conclusion I agree with him from a practical knowledge. The wages of cotton mill employees the world over are low, compared to skilled mechanics. No great skill is required of the average cotton mill operative—only activity of action and nimbleness of finger. But whether the scale of wages be high or low, it is nevertheless true that it is higher than the employee could secure in any other pursuit open to him, and all things must be judged relatively. If, as I believe, the wage is somewhat lower than that paid in northern factories, the answer is that the cost of living in the South is correspondingly lower. Indeed, the writer has had a number of employees go North into northern factories, and return with the statement that they found the net results of a day's work to them after deduction of expenses, greater in the southern mills than in the northern. Certain it is that the wages are sufficiently high to have

attracted to the industry a very large proportion of the white population of the State of South Carolina and to have had this effect the wages must have been greater than this population could have secured in any other work.

Criticism of southern mill conditions is usually directed to two subjects, viz., the general character of the employees and secondly, the proportion of child labor. As to the first, it can only be said that from the evidence of well-advised and impartial students, the character of the employees is being steadily raised, and is superior to that in their former life. This is the verdict of such investigators as Miss Gertrude Beeks, secretary of the welfare department of the National Civic Federation; of Mrs. Ellen Foster, a well-known authority in sociology, who as an employee of the government, made a report to the President of the United States to this effect; of Dr. P. H. Goldsmith, the minister of the historic First Church in Salem, Massachusetts, who whilst a native of the South, has spent most of his adult years in the North. In a series of articles appearing in 1908 in the "Boston Evening Transcript," Doctor Goldsmith wrote as follows: "The only just comparison is between their present and their past state. In going through mills of the Piedmont section recently, I invariably saw the best-looking people, the most intelligent workmen, the brightest and happiest children, and cheeks possessing the most color, in the factories of longest establishment." The same conclusion is reached by Professor Few in the article referred to.

With regard to child labor, there is no doubt that at certain stages in the development of the industry the proportion of children in the mills was unduly large, and was unfortunate. The reasons for this, however, were two-fold. In the first place, when the family came to the mill village, the older members of the family were unfit for the most skilful parts of the work. The father had acquired habits which made it impossible for him to be active and quick enough to be a spinner or weaver. His fingers had been so gnarled and roughened by agricultural work as to be unsuitable for the tying of small threads. He could earn only the wage of the common laborer, and no one could supply the places in the factory requiring an active and nimble finger, except the younger members of the family. Again, these could be secured at low wage, and many manufacturers were misled into the belief that a low wage was neces-

sarily an incident to a low cost of production. In the progress of the industry, and in the succession of years, a new generation is growing up, and the mills have found it practicable and advisable to supplant the younger children by youths and adults. The proportion of children of tender age—say fourteen years and under—in employment in the mills now, for the reasons above, is very much less than it was five or ten years ago, and this proportion, irrespective of legislation, will continue to grow less. The child is the most expensive employee that the mill has. From the writer's experience, the mill can well afford to pay more per piece or per machine for work done by the adult than for similar work done by the young child. A spinner, for instance, who is paid by the machine, or by the "side," as it is called, taking, in print cloth numbers, say twelve sides, is a much more economical employee to the mill than a child who is paid the same price per side and who takes only four or six sides. The results to the mill of the day's work are much better in the case of the adult than the child, and experience in this has tended of itself to decrease the number of children in employment. In addition to this fact, the bettered circumstances of the family have tended to the same effect. In the pamphlet referred to by Mr. Kohn, he says, "With the increase of wage there has been a corresponding decrease of employment of children. This effect will continue until in my judgment the proportion of objectionably young children in the mills will altogether cease." I differ, therefore, altogether from those who would proclaim that there is a constant increase of the employment of children in southern cotton mills. My conclusion would be exactly the reverse and this conclusion will be borne out by the census of the United States, I believe, as it is by careful statisticians such as Mr. Kohn. The latter, in referring to the question of employment of children in South Carolina, said, "The more I study the question, the more I become convinced that the tendency of the outsider was to exaggerate the number of children in the mills, and the tendency of the mill presidents was to keep the children out of the mills, if for no other than for economic reasons."

That the manufacturers of South Carolina are sincere in their desire and intention of keeping the young children out of the mills is proven by their course with regard to legislation. No persons in the state have been more persistent in their advocacy of a general compulsory school law than have the manufacturers. With the election

of each new legislature for the past six or more years, these manufacturers have presented to the legislature a petition, seeking the enactment of laws requiring the compulsory education of children. At a meeting of the Cotton Manufacturers' Association of South Carolina, held but a few weeks ago, a resolution was adopted, memorializing the legislature to pass a compulsory school law, requiring the attendance of all children under the age of fourteen years, and stating that in the judgment of the manufacturers, such a law would be the most effective child labor law which could be passed, and furthermore stating that if such a law were passed, the manufacturers would make no objection whatever to the passage of a child labor bill forbidding the employment of children, in cotton mills, under the age of fourteen. In other words, the manufacturers have believed, in common with many thinking people in other communities, that a compulsory education law was a proper and necessary incident to a child labor law, and have urged the enactment of the two bills at the same time. At the present time, the child labor law in South Carolina prohibits only the employment of children under twelve. The manufacturers of the state are willing to raise this age limit to fourteen, if legislation to this effect be accompanied by a compulsory school law. In any event, there can be no question in the mind of any impartial student of conditions that there is a steady decrease in the proportion of children employed, and this decrease will continue for the reasons outlined. It is most unfortunate that many who are honestly seeking the prohibition of child labor should find it necessary to greatly exaggerate its present evils. For illustration, a very general impression has been created by writers upon and critics of southern cotton mills that it was usual in all the southern states to work children at night. Just criticism of this practice may be made of some states, but as to South Carolina, the incorrectness of such a view is apparent, when it is known that there are practically no mills in South Carolina operating at night. The writer thinks that he is familiar with the large proportion of mills in the state, and certainly lives and operates mills in that section in which the industry is most thriving, and in which the largest number of plants are located. Yet, to his knowledge, there is not in the counties of Spartanburg, Anderson and Greenville, in which are a large majority of the spindles of the state, a single mill operating at night, and he knows of but two plants in the whole state

—and these are of but comparatively small size—which operate at night. The manufacturers have not sought to prevent legislation prohibiting the employment of children at night, and without objection on their part, and indeed, on their recommendation, there was passed several years ago a bill prohibiting the employment of children under the age of twelve, between the hours of seven p. m. and six a. m.; and there is now pending before the legislature a bill, which is meeting with no objection on their part, prohibiting the employment of children under the age of sixteen years between such hours.

The condition of the employee in southern mills is steadily improving, and the percentage and number of young children in employment is steadily decreasing. These two results must be a cause of congratulation to the people of the whole Union, as unquestionably they are to the people of the southern states. These results have been certainly to a very large measure consequent upon the work of the manufacturers themselves.

In conclusion, I would quote again from the article of Professor Few, already referred to, in which he says, "Much still remains to be done, but this is not going to be done by crude, unfair or evil-minded agitators, or by well-meaning but ill-informed sentimentalists. The working out through actual experience, step by step, as is being done by the mill referred to, of the hard problems of factory life, is worth more than any amount of vague theorizings of idealists."